

## Deciding What's Important to Learn

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**W**hen the standards movement began over a decade ago, most educators were ecstatic about the prospect of having clearly articulated student learning goals in the various subject areas. The release of the first set of standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in 1989 was greeted with unprecedented optimism. Standards such as these offered direction to reform initiatives by providing consensus about what is important for students to learn and what skills they should acquire. Standards also brought much needed focus to curriculum development efforts and provided the impetus for fashioning new forms of student assessment.

As other groups and professional organizations set about developing standards, however, they quickly discovered that the task was more difficult and more vexing than ever anticipated. Political and educational controversies posed major stumbling blocks. Turf issues and arguments about priorities hampered the best-intentioned efforts. Although significant progress has been made in nearly every subject area, it has not come easily and the results have not always been enthusiastically received.

*Why is it so difficult to make decisions about our educational goals? Why do we find it so challenging at any level to get agreement about what students should learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school? What are the implications of these decisions for those who do the real work of education at the classroom level?*

While there are no simple answers to these questions, I believe many of the difficulties encountered in our efforts to find answers could be resolved if we recognized two important facts and then are guided in our actions by three crucial principles. The two facts clarify our task while the three principles provide a foundation for this important work and direct us toward results that will stand the test of time.

**"Why is it so difficult to make decisions about our educational goals?"**

**Fact #1: The importance of clear learning goals (standards) is *not* a new idea.**

Many educators today believe the push to define standards and clarify learning goals is a recent phenomenon in education. The dominant educational theme of the 1990's was certainly to "get serious about standards" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). But the importance of well-defined learning goals has been recognized for decades--we just haven't done much about it.

Over 50 years ago renowned educator Ralph W. Tyler (1949) stressed that prior to teaching anyone anything, two fundamental questions must be addressed: (1) what do I want my students to learn and be able to do?; and (2) What evidence would I accept to verify that learning? As Tyler put it,

If an educational program is to be planned and if efforts for continued improvement are to be made, it is necessary to have some conception of the goals being sought. These educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed and tests and examinations are prepared. All aspects of the educational program are really means to accomplish these basic educational purposes. (p. 3).

As logical as this seems, Tyler also pointed out that most curriculum decisions are not based on student learning. Instead, they are based on time. We tend to worry more about what content should be covered in the time available than we do about what students acquire. As a result, we cannot say with certainty what the graduates of our schools have learned and are able to do. All we know for sure, argued Tyler, is how much time they spent in the school environment.

Similarly at the college level, students typically must earn a specified number of credit-hours to attain their degree. Credit-hours are earned by accumulating "contact-hours," defined as contact between students and their professors. From Tyler's perspective, however, credit-hours more accurately reflected contact between students and their seats.

Tyler further argued that the best indicators of teachers' effectiveness are based not on what teachers do, but on what students are able to do. In other words, teaching and learning must be seen as intrinsically linked. For a teacher to suggest, "I taught it to them, they just didn't learn it." was to Tyler as foolish as saying, "I sold it to them, they just didn't buy it." It was like saying, "I taught this fellow to swim, even though each time he jumps in the water he still sinks." Tyler emphasized that teaching is not something one can go off, alone into the wilderness, and do--not even if curriculum guides, textbooks, and lesson plans are carried along!

Obviously, the importance of defining our goals and identifying how those goals will be assessed has been recognized for many years. These are not new ideas. To improve our success in education, however, we must commit ourselves to making these decisions and following them through.

**Fact #2: The goals we choose reflect our philosophy of schooling.**

A major reason defining our educational goals is so difficult is that those involved in the task often hold different philosophies of schooling. These philosophies reflect not only what we value as individuals, but also what we hope for and value as a society. When philosophies differ, the goals being sought differ as well. Again, Ralph Tyler (1949) pointed out:

A fundamental first step in the process of defining our educational goals is to make our philosophies of schooling clear. ...Should the school develop young people to fit into the present society as is or does the school have a revolutionary mission to develop young people who will seek to improve the society? ... How these questions are answered affects the educational objectives we select. If the school believes its primary function is to teach people to adjust to society, it will strongly emphasize obedience to the present authorities, loyalty to the present forms and traditions, skills in carrying on the present techniques of life. Whereas if it emphasizes the revolutionary function of the school it will be more concerned with critical analysis, the ability to meet new problems, independence and self-direction, freedom, and self-discipline. (pp.35-36).

Philosophical conflicts about how traditional or revolutionary schools should be are at the root of many current debates regarding standards and learning goals. If we are going to move ahead in these efforts, we must make these differences clear and work toward meaningful compromise. Only then can some measure of consensus among differing philosophical perspectives be achieved.

Having acknowledged the vital importance of clear standards and the need to recognize and resolve our philosophical differences, we are ready to consider a plan for action. The following three principles provide direction for that important work. Keeping these principles in mind will not only help focus our efforts, it will prevent distraction from peripheral issues that divert attention and waste valuable resources.

**Principle #1: The ideas are more important than the vocabulary we use.**

Many educators today are engaged in a war of words. This war involves a tangled thicket of terminology that few teachers understand and neither students nor their parents comprehend. Arguments about differences between these words evoke great passion and often lead to long debates. Sadly, these arguments also squander precious time and detract from the important work that needs to be done.

A few years ago, for example, I was asked to facilitate the work of a school district's curriculum development committee that had stalled in its efforts to design a district-wide curriculum. I quickly discovered what prevented committee members from making progress in their work were squabbles over terminology. These thoughtful, dedicated, and highly knowledgeable educators spent most of their time arguing about whether the things they were generating were "goals" or "objectives."

To help them avoid continued frustration, I wrote a simple statement on a single sheet of paper. My statement began with the phrase, "The student will be able to..." I've always been fond of this phrase and wish I'd copyrighted it at some point. I then added a popular, high level, performance-based verb, such as "demonstrate," and completed the statement with some elements of content. I then showed my statement to the group and suggested they consider it a simple, multiple-choice question. "Please read this statement," I asked, "and tell me, is this statement a(n):

- |              |                           |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| a. Goal      | f. Competency             |
| b. Objective | g. Proficiency            |
| c. Standard  | h. Performance            |
| d. Outcome   | i. Expectation            |
| e. Benchmark | j. New Year's Resolution? |

The resulting debate proved to be far more serious than I ever intended and took up most of the next hour. So I left the room, carrying my statement to the cafeteria where students were having lunch, and asked ten different high school students the same question. Unlike the teachers and school administrators on the curriculum development committee who had great difficulty reaching consensus, every student gave me the same answer: "Who cares?"

It's vitally important that educators be clear about what they expect students to learn and be able to do as a result of their experiences in school. It's also crucial that decisions be made about what evidence best reflects that learning. In the long run, however, the label we attach to those things is unimportant. To the degree distinctions in terminology are helpful and an aide in the clarification process, they should be used. But the confusion and distraction that such distinctions often cause must be avoided. Being clear about what we want students to learn and be able to do is far more important than the particular vocabulary we use to describe those things.

**Principle #2: Good ideas can be implemented poorly or not at all.**

The end product of nearly all efforts to clarify educational goals is a document or series of documents typically labeled a "curriculum framework" or "set of learning standards." In most cases these documents are bound in large

notebooks, color-coded by level, and printed with large type so they can be easily read. They are distributed to teachers at the appropriate grade levels and are the pride of school district and state curriculum directors. Whether or not they're used as intended, adapted appropriately, or ever used at all, is rarely considered.

If modern curriculum frameworks and learning standards are to make a difference in classroom practice and lead to improvements in student

learning, we must give serious consideration to their implementation. In the absence of a focus on implementation, it's likely these documents will end up in the same place as the curriculum guides developed in the 1970's. They, too, were carefully designed, color-coded by level, and used large print. But because little attention was paid to how they could be practically and efficiently used, most teachers looked at them briefly, then put them into desk drawers or on book shelves where they did little

more than gather dust, and continued to teach using whatever textbooks and materials were available.

An essential aspect in the design of any curriculum is consideration of how it will be implemented (Joyce, 1993). This involves the difficult task of bridging the sometimes wide and deep chasm between the goals we set and prevailing policies and practices. We must consider, for example, what types of professional development teachers and school administrators will need to understand and implement these new educational goals. We

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need to determine what additional materials and resources will be required. We also must consider how the effects of these efforts will be assessed and evaluated. Regardless of the work that goes into the clarification of our educational goals, the true value of this work will depend directly on the quality of its implementation.

## **Principle #3: Success hinges on what happens at the classroom level.**

Studies of change convincingly show that success in any change effort always hinges on what happens at the smallest unit of the organization (Senge, 1990). What this says to educators is that success in improvement efforts will always hinge on what happens at the classroom level. The hard lesson learned from analyses of the various waves of education reform is that it doesn't matter what happens at the national level, the state level, or even the district level. Unless change takes place at the school building and classroom levels, improvement is unlikely. As Colley (1997) lamented:

I have concluded that most educational reform takes place in our literature and on the pages of *Education Week*, not in schools and classrooms. ...It seemed to me that all this talk about waves and waves of reforms really refers to trends in the reform literature, not changes that are really taking place in real schools. Of course, that's true of waves. They tend to be highly visible at the surface, but do not affect what's going on down in the lower depths. (p. 18).

Improvement in education means simply more students learning better, and the only level at which that generally takes place is in classrooms. Sadly, judged by the criterion of classroom impact, most educational reforms have a poor record of success (Sarason, 1990). Even reforms that include

the development of higher level learning standards for students paired with performance assessments on which teachers are held accountable for results, changes in classroom practice remain relatively modest (Guskey, 1994). Significant change at the classroom level is tied more directly to the provision of on-going, job-embedded, high quality professional development (Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Lieberman, 1995).

Efforts to clarify what students should learn and be able to do and how they should act as a result of their experiences in school are vitally important. Such efforts provide essential focus and direction in reform initiatives at all levels. But clearly specified goals are just the first step in the improvement process. If our efforts to clarify learning goals are to lead to the significant improvements in student learning for which they are intended, serious consideration must be given to the intended impact on classroom practices and the conditions necessary for change at that level.

## **Conclusion**

Clarifying our educational goals will never be easy. The process is enormously complex and highly political, especially when it involves individuals with different world views that reflect divergent philosophies of education. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of our society and the world, it is a continuously evolving process. The learning goals we establish today are unlikely to be adequate five years from now and will surely be antiquated ten years hence. As Ralph Tyler emphasized, however, it is a process that is essential to teaching and learning at all levels and, therefore, a task we must achieve. Attending to the facts and principles described here will not make the process less challenging. It will, however, ensure that efforts remain focused on the issues most crucial to success. °

*References available upon request.*